10-2017

Engaging in the Undergraduate Researcher Writers' Process: Creating a Thesis Writers' Bootcamp

Katie Harding
Dartmouth College, Katie.Harding@Dartmouth.edu

Lora Leligdon
Dartmouth College, lora.c.leligdon@dartmouth.edu

CHAPTER 8 *

Engaging in the Undergraduate Researcher Writers' Process:

Creating a Thesis Writers' Bootcamp

Katie Harding and Lora Leligdon

Introduction

Holistic support for independent undergraduate research needs to exist throughout the entire undergraduate research lifecycle. While many library programs support the beginning phases of the lifecycle—especially during the discovery phase—one area of opportunity for engagement is increased support during the writing phase. To support undergraduate researchers during this phase, libraries can provide programs such as writing bootcamps or retreats for students completing a senior thesis or other culminating project. Writing retreats and bootcamps can enable undergraduate researchers to build community with their peers, develop important time management strategies, avoid and overcome writer's block and procrastination, acquire ex-

perience with goal setting and meeting deadlines, and practice good writing habits. They also provide students with the opportunity to meet with, ask questions of, and learn from experts in writing and research.

As experts in information creation, retrieval, and management, librarians have a natural affinity to support the writing phase of the research lifecycle. Our physical spaces and our identity as the hub of scholarly activities on campus are a natural fit to support this important aspect of the undergraduate research process. Thesis writers' bootcamps or retreats are an impactful, easy-to-implement, and low-cost way to support students during this process. While our discussion is based on our experiences in a science library, the information provided about writing retreats and bootcamps is easily transferable to other disciplines, colleges, and academic libraries.

Background

Dartmouth College is a private liberal arts college located in Hanover, New Hampshire. Dartmouth offers undergraduate and graduate degrees and has three professional schools: the Geisel School of Medicine, Thayer School of Engineering, and Tuck School of Business. In the fall of 2015, 4,307 undergraduate students and 2,043 graduate students were enrolled at Dartmouth.[1] All undergraduate students at Dartmouth College must complete a culminating experience in their major, such as a thesis or major research project.[2] To meet this requirement, many students in the sciences complete an undergraduate thesis.

At Dartmouth, the Kresge Physical Sciences Library supports the departments of Chemistry, Computer Science, Earth Sciences, Environmental Studies, Mathematics, and Physics and Astronomy. Librarians at Kresge Library offer traditional services, such as research consultations and reference services, information literacy instruction, and citation management workshops. We also provide services and programming to support science students in all phases of their culminating experience, such as a series of workshops on advanced research skills (e.g., information and data management) and support for undergraduate research symposia (poster preparation workshops, presentation practice sessions, and an award for library research). To support thesis writers, for the past several years, Kresge Library has offered a Thesis Writers' Bootcamp for the Sciences. Our bootcamp included the critical components of a writers' retreat as described by Stanford University: space, routine, peers, and experts.[3] These elements include:

- The library provides a dedicated, quiet space that is free of distractions to facilitate student writing.
- A daily schedule provides thesis writers with a routine and protected time in which to complete their writing.

- The presence of other students working on similar projects provides motivation and a sense of community, which the library can encourage through bootcamp programming.
- Experts such as librarians and writing specialists can help students through any problems they may encounter, and can help students get "unstuck."

In addition to each of these components, our thesis writers' bootcamp also offered several other value-added components, including:

- goal-setting opportunities for students to consider what they wish to accomplish over the course of the bootcamp
- examples of "exemplary" theses from various scientific departments
- peer review sessions in which students are able to learn from both giving and receiving peer feedback
- free lunch and snacks to keep energy levels high and ensure that students can focus on their writing

While the majority of the bootcamp was allocated to protected writing time, we were able to interact with students at several times throughout the day. This year, during the morning kick-off and goal setting session, we fielded questions on departmental thesis guidelines and how to find Dartmouth undergraduate theses using the library catalog. During the drop-in consultation sessions, we received questions about topics such as searching for literature in Web of Science and using LaTeX to typeset a thesis. At the end of each day, we had conversations with students in which we prompted them to reflect on the progress they had made toward their writing goals and we acknowledged their hard work and accomplishments.

Further ideas for programming can be found in a description of a senior thesis camp offered by librarians at the University of Notre Dame.[4] Their senior thesis camp in the College of Arts and Letters was held for five days during fall break and included workshops on such topics as citation management, conducting a literature review, intellectual property, student presentations, and undergraduate scholar opportunities and fellowships.[5] A thesis writing bootcamp also presents a valuable opportunity to talk to students about making their work available in the institutional repository and to encourage them to submit their thesis if policy allows.

Partnerships

Partnerships are a critical element of a successful bootcamp. The science librarians collaborated with several programs and departments on campus to implement the event.

Library

Science librarians organized the thesis writers' bootcamp. We were responsible for planning the event, including choosing an appropriate time and location, creating a bootcamp schedule, ordering lunch and snacks, creating signage, coordinating with the writing tutor and academic departments, marketing the event to students and faculty, coordinating registration, and providing evaluations (and incentives for completing them!). During the bootcamp, our role as organizers included setup, facilitating introductions at the start of the day, and encouraging students to set goals for the bootcamp. Liaison librarians also offered research help to students during the bootcamp, including guidance in creating literature searches, assistance with citations, and assistance with presenting data. The science library was responsible for the budget of the event. While a writing bootcamp is relatively inexpensive, the associated costs should be estimated carefully. When implementing a writing retreat or bootcamp, the costs of the following items were considered:

- lunch, beverages, and snacks for all participants
- costs associated with a campus-affiliated or external writing specialist
- prizes or incentives to encourage students to complete a short feedback survey
- printing of marketing materials, signage, and thesis guidelines
- any facility costs, such as extended weekend hours or additional custodian support

If existing campus support services (space, printing, tutors, etc.) are already included in an annual budget, only food and prizes add additional expense to the event.

Writing Center

Dartmouth's Institute for Writing and Rhetoric provided materials and tutors for the thesis writers' bootcamp. These materials included guidelines for peer reviewing and thesis writing tips. During the bootcamp, the writing tutor gave a short presentation to students about how to manage a major writing project and provided some effective strategies. The tutor was also available to meet with students for individual consultations in which to provide feedback on portions of student drafts or answer questions related to writing. Finally, the writing tutor organized the peer review sessions and provided guidelines to students for peer review. During peer review sessions, students were able to receive constructive peer support and recommendations on their writing from the perspective of a peer who was not already familiar with their project. Though the paired peer review students worked independently, the writing tutor was available to answer any questions.

Academic Departments in the Sciences

Each academic department in the sciences provided us with their guidelines for students writing undergraduate theses and past examples of undergraduate theses that were particularly well done. We provided these resources as part of the bootcamp in order to help students understand expectations for their thesis.

Another important role of the academic departments was to provide publicity for the thesis writers' bootcamp. Liaison librarians emailed both students and faculty in their departments to share information about the bootcamp. We found that students were especially motivated to attend the bootcamp when it was recommended by their faculty supervisor or other faculty in the department, which is consistent with student feedback received by librarians at the University of Notre Dame.[6] Feedback provided by the faculty indicated that they appreciated the student support that the bootcamp provided.

Reflection

We found that thesis writers' bootcamps are an easy-to-implement, low-cost way for libraries to support undergraduates as they write their thesis. Students benefit from having protected and supported writing time in a quiet space free of distractions, and they are always especially grateful when free food is provided.

In our experience, it is useful to provide students with resources and experts who they can consult when they are having trouble with writing or research, but in general students use bootcamp time according to their own needs, regardless of what is on the schedule. While it is important for us to be thoughtful in creating our bootcamp schedule, it is equally important for us to be flexible and willing to adapt to the needs of students during the bootcamp. We have tried to allow our thesis writers' bootcamp to be shaped by our experiences and student feedback from our library's previous bootcamps.

A writing tutor is a highly valuable resource for students at the retreat. Students may or may not feel that they are ready to meet with a writing tutor, depending on the progress that they have made on their thesis. We recommend advertising meetings with writing tutors prior to the retreat, and providing students with clear guidelines for preparing for a discussion with a writing tutor. Although we advertised the writing tutor ahead of time, we found that few students met with the writing tutor. Smith and Kayongo noted that only two students in the University of Notre Dame senior thesis camp met with a writing tutor and that both of these students asked questions but

did not bring in any drafts of their writing.[7] If retreat attendance is low or if students do not feel prepared to meet with a writing tutor, it can be difficult to balance making the writing tutor available to students and ensuring that the writing tutor's time is well used. This is especially true if there is a cost associated with hosting a writing tutor. We balanced this by choosing to invite the writing tutor to attend one day of our two-day bootcamp.

Scheduling and timing are challenging when organizing a writing bootcamp or retreat. Senior undergraduates tend to be very busy, so when choosing dates we considered thesis deadlines, deadlines for other major assignments, and exam schedules. Additionally, our library supports students in a number of different disciplines and with different requirements, and we wanted to be as inclusive as possible when offering our thesis writers' bootcamp. Because the deadline for undergraduate theses varies by department, choosing dates that would be useful to students in different disciplines was difficult. We attempted to address this challenge by offering two bootcamp dates several weeks apart.

We offered our thesis writers' bootcamp on the weekend to ensure that students had a full day of uninterrupted writing time and did not have scheduling conflicts with their courses. We found that scheduling a bootcamp to start mid-morning on a Sunday meant that attendance was relatively low early in the day. Going forward, it may be worthwhile to consider a later start time or to plan for the welcome session to coincide with a meal or snack.

In developing a bootcamp schedule for our students, it was difficult to find a balance between writing time and time with experts in writing and research. We recommend that writing bootcamps emphasize writing time over instruction. It was useful for us to share some of our expertise with students and to be available when needed, but students primarily needed protected time and space to write.

Bootcamp events benefit both the students and the library. While students benefit in the ways described above, the library also gains from the event. One notable benefit of writing retreats and bootcamps is they help librarians to promote our role in research to students, faculty, and campus partners. We sometimes find it difficult to convey to faculty, students, and staff on campus the breadth of expertise and services that we can offer. A thesis writers' bootcamp helped us to demonstrate to our patrons that supporting all phases of research is a priority for libraries, and to emphasize some of the forms that support can take.

Assessment

In evaluating our thesis writers' bootcamp, we considered both our attendance and the feedback received from students in a post-bootcamp survey. Post-event

surveys from 2014–2016 assessed how helpful students found the bootcamp in terms of helping them make progress on their thesis, what items or sessions were helpful, and any suggestions for improvements or changes for future events. When the writing tutor and peer-to-peer review sessions were added in 2015, we added questions on how helpful students found these sessions.

Overall, 74 percent of students rated the bootcamps as "very helpful," 26 percent found them "helpful," and no students rated the events "not particular helpful" or "'not helpful at all." When students were asked what was particularly useful at the event, frequent responses included snacks, lunch, the environment, peers, dedicated writing time, and support. Based on feedback from the 2014 survey requesting additional support, we added writing support in the form of a writing tutor and peer editing sessions for 2015 and 2016.

When we examined the results of the survey, we noticed that many students attended only one day of the bootcamp. This indicated to us that it is important to ensure that each day of thesis writers' bootcamp is self-contained. Verbal feedback from the attendees, both during and after the event, indicated that the event is very appreciated, useful, and even fun.

Informal feedback received from library administration, the writing tutor, and faculty indicated that the bootcamp is appreciated and beneficial to students. We were encouraged to continue to hold the event each year.

Recommendations/Best Practices

Thesis bootcamps or writing retreats support students in the writing phase of the research lifecycle by providing the space, routine, peers, and experts needed for students to successfully engage with their thesis. By engaging with faculty and academic departments early in the process, the materials and support needed are easy to acquire. Best practices for successful bootcamps include providing a balance of writing time and activities, carefully considering the timing and schedule of the event for maximum impact during the term, offering a variety of value-added components to let bootcampers design their own experience, and having plenty of food and drinks available.

Successful bootcamp events could also be used to transition into other new initiatives. Building off the event to offer ongoing undergraduate writers groups or stand-alone bootcamp events for graduate students and faculty writers are ways to provide new programs. At Dartmouth, we are building on the success of our thesis writers' bootcamp and planning to offer a writers' retreat for graduate students and postdoctoral fellows in the sciences.

Conclusion

Events like writing bootcamps and retreats not only help raise the library's profile as partner and an integral part of the undergraduate research process, they also demonstrate that the library provides full research workflow support, going well beyond traditional collection and instruction. We strongly recommend that other libraries implement these low-cost, easy, and well appreciated events.

Sample thesis bootcamp schedule

Time	Program	Day 1	Day 2
10:00 a.m.	Bootcamp starts		
10:10 a.m. –10:30 a.m.	Kick-off event	Set a writing goal for the day and hear tips on how to tackle a big writing project.	Set a writing goal for the day and hear about the benefits of peer to peer review.
10:30 a.m. –12:00 p.m.	Focused writing time	Individual writing time. Exemplary sample theses, departmental guidelines, and writing and style guides available for review.	
12:00 p.m.– 1:15 p.m.	Lunch	Join us for a healthy group lunch on us!	
1:15 p.m.– 1:30 p.m.	Campers' check-in	Goal check-in and afternoon schedule review.	
1:30 p.m.– 2:30 p.m.	Focused writing time Drop-in consultations (optional)	Meet with a librarian for help with: research and literature reviews; bibliographies and reference management software (Zotero, Mendeley); Word/Excel (formatting; charts, figures, tables).	Meet with a writing tutor for help with: expert feedback on your draft; writing style and guidelines; thesis writing tips.

2:30 p.m.– 3:30 p.m.	Focused writing time Peer review sessions (optional)		Give and receive feedback on your introduction, lit review, data amd analysis, or conclusion from other thesis writers.
3:30 p.m.– 5:00 p.m.	Focused writing time	Individual writing time. Exemplary sample theses, departmental guidelines, and writing and style guides available for review.	
5:00 p.m.	Bootcamp ends		

Notes

1. Dartmouth College, "Enrollment," accessed June 24, 2016, https://www.dartmouth.edu/~oir/data-reporting/factbook/enrollment.html.
2. Dartmouth College, "Culminating Experience in the Major," accessed June 23, 2016, http://dartmouth.smartcatalogiq.com/en/2015/orc/Regulations/Undergraduate-Study/Requirements-for-the-Degree-of-Bachelor-of-Arts/Culminating-Experience-in-the-Major.
3. Stanford University, "Dissertation Boot Camp," accessed March 2, 2016, https://undergrad.stanford.edu/tutoring-support/hume-center/writing/graduate-students/dissertation-boot-camp.
4. Cheri Smith and Jessica Kayongo, "Senior Thesis Camp: Partnerships in Practice at the University of Notre Dame," *Journal of Academic Librarianship* 37, no. 5 (2011): 437–42, doi:10.1016/j.acalib.2011.06.008.
5. Ibid., 440.
6. Ibid., 438.
7. Ibid., 441.

Bibliography

Dartmouth College. "Culminating Experience in the Major." Accessed June 23, 2016. http://dartmouth.smartcatalogiq.com/en/2015/orc/Regulations/Undergraduate-Study/Requirements-for-the-Degree-of-Bachelor-of-Arts/Culminating-Experience-in-the-Major.

Dartmouth College. "Enrollment." Accessed June 24, 2016. https://www.dartmouth.edu/~oir/data-reporting/factbook/enrollment.html.

Smith, Cheri, and Jessica Kayongo. "Senior Thesis Camp: Partnerships in Practice at the University of Notre Dame." *Journal of Academic Librarianship* 37, no. 5 (2011): 437–42, doi:10.1016/j.acalib.2011.06.008.

Stanford University. "Dissertation Boot Camp." Accessed March 2, 2016. https://un-dergrad.stanford.edu/tutoring-support/hume-center/writing/graduate-students/dissertation-boot-camp.